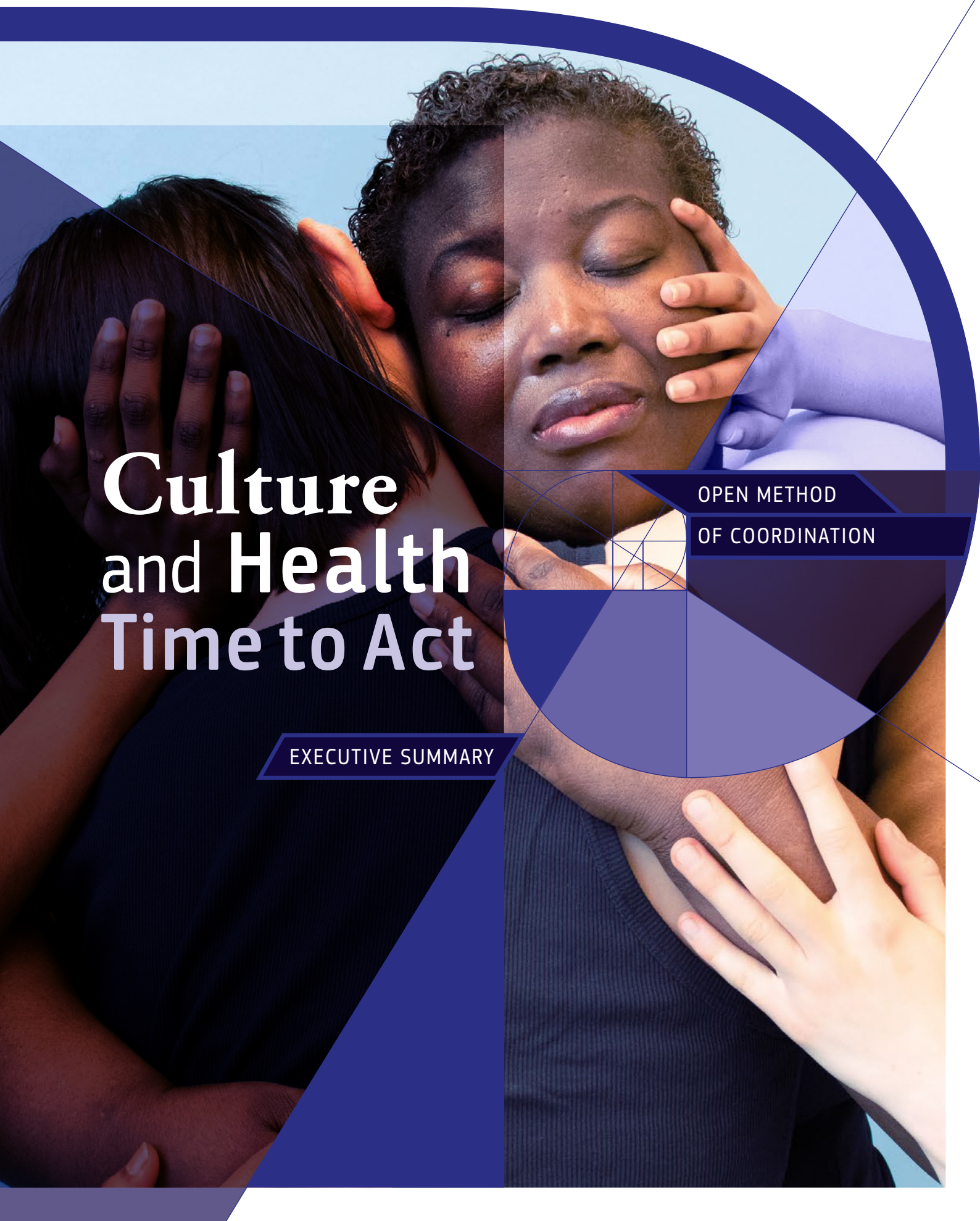




Culture and Health Time to Act

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OPEN METHOD
OF COORDINATION

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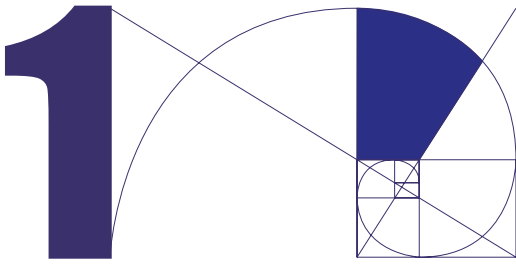
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The benefits of participation in culture and the arts for human health and well-being have been intuitively understood throughout history. Today, a growing body of evidence reveals their profound interconnection, and makes the case for recognising cultural engagement as a positive health behaviour.

Culture and Health has become a distinct intersectoral field of practice, making them powerful allies to address complex contemporary challenges¹.

Over recent decades, research and interdisciplinary collaboration have established that artistic and cultural engagement can influence the promotion of good health, the prevention of ill health, and the management and treatment of disease. By the same token, enabling cultural engagement for everyone, regardless of health status, strengthens cultural resilience². This dynamic relationship opens new pathways for innovative, equitable, and sustainable solutions to contemporary global issues at the intersection of Culture and Health.

This report by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) expert group on Culture and Health highlights the transformative potential of joint culture, health and well-being strategies across the European Union, and builds upon several EU policies and priorities. The OMC group was established under the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026³, highlighting the transformative potential of joint culture, health and well-being strategies across the European Union. Its work responds to urgent and often interconnected challenges, including the mental health crisis, an ageing population, and social fragmentation⁴.

The topic of Culture and Health also aligns with the European Commission's key priorities for 2024–2029⁵ — ‘A free and democratic Europe’, ‘A strong and secure Europe’, and ‘A prosperous and competitive Europe’ — as cultural engagement fosters innovation and resilience, and enhances mental health of people, communities and societies. EU priorities relating to democracy and security cannot be achieved without physically and mentally healthy individuals and communities that are more cohesive, resilient and less susceptible to disinformation and propaganda.

¹ Fancourt and Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?*; Warran, Burton, and Fancourt, ‘What Are the Active Ingredients of ‘Arts in Health’ Activities?’; Zbranca, R. et al., ‘CultureForHealth Report: Culture’s Contribution to Health and Well-Being. A Report on Evidence and Policy Recommendations for Europe.’; Fancourt et al., ‘The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health: Findings from Major Cohort Studies in the UK and USA 2017 – 2022’.

² Fancourt and Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?*; Tubadji, ‘Culture and Mental Health Resilience in Times of COVID-19’; Panter-Brick, ‘Health, Risk, and Resilience’.

³ Council of the European Union, ‘Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026’.

⁴ COM, ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health’; European Commission, ‘On a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health’; ‘2024 Ageing Report. Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2022–2070) – European Commission’; Mario G. H. Damen, ‘EU Policy Foresight’.

⁵ European Commission’s 2024–2029 Priorities.

At the same time, a competitive Europe needs creative thinking and innovation, which is fostered by a vibrant, inclusive, and accessible cultural sector.

The connection between culture and health as outlined in this OMC report is also recognised by the European public.

The 2025 Eurobarometer on cultural participation revealed that 87% of Europeans, and 89% of young people believe cultural participation enhances emotional and physical wellbeing. This growing understanding of the connection of culture and health is also gaining momentum globally with, for example, a World Health Organization (WHO) resolution calling on its member countries to strengthen collaboration between culture and health sectors to promote social inclusion and cohesion⁶.

In this context, Culture and Health can play a critical role in the forthcoming Culture Compass for Europe. This new EU strategic

framework for cultural policy aims to position culture as a driver for well-being and health, alongside its roles in democracy, social cohesion and competitiveness⁷. Therefore, it will be essential that the future EU Workplan for Culture includes concrete actions on Culture and Health.

This OMC report presents a comprehensive analysis of the holistic alignment between culture and health. Cultural participation and health are recognised not only as human rights⁸, but also as determinants of individual and societal well-being⁹. The Culture and Health domain is founded on a principle of equal partnership between the culture and health sectors and is based on the biopsychosocial model of medicine¹⁰. Cultural and artistic activities can create valuable synergies across a continuum, spanning community-level arts engagement, public health interventions, as well as activities within healthcare settings.

Focus on Good Practices ...

This report builds on a wealth of established good practices and lived experience. The expert group gathered examples from all EU Member States and Ukraine, as well as transnational European initiatives, identifying recurring patterns in different national contexts. These practices are presented in thematic clusters, offering actionable insights throughout this report. While not exhaustive —further examples can be found in the annex — they demonstrate the growing recognition of culture and the arts as vital contributors to health and well-being.

The case studies in this report illustrate how to:

- raise awareness of the transformative potential of integrating Culture and Health;
- foster cross-sectoral collaboration between cultural, health, and social sectors, both in the community and in the health and social care systems;
- advance evidence-based practices to strengthen policy and implementation;
- support the integration of culture into healthcare systems;
- unlock the broader societal potential of culture beyond its artistic and intellectual value;
- build the capacity of creative practitioners and cultural professionals to work in the field of Culture and Health;
- promote inclusivity, ensuring equitable access to cultural activities for all, regardless of health and socio-economic status.

⁶ WHO Resolution WHA78.9: Fostering Social Connection for Global Health: The Essential Role of Social Connection in Combating Loneliness, Social Isolation and Inequities in Health.

⁷ Georgescu, 'A New Culture Compass for Europe'.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

⁹ Kemp and Fisher, 'Wellbeing, Whole Health and Societal Transformation'; Golden et al., 'Arts and Culture'; Livingston, Jackson-Nevels, and Reddy, 'Social, Cultural, and Economic Determinants of Well-Being'.

¹⁰ Engel, 'The Clinical Application of the Biopsychosocial Model'; Wade and Halligan, 'The Biopsychosocial Model of Illness'.

Currently, Culture and Health practices are predominantly promoted by private actors, grassroot and non-governmental Organisations (NGOs)–creative practitioners, artistic associations,

cultural professionals, medical professionals–as well as cultural institutions. Engagement with these stakeholders is the foundation of any cross-sectoral collaboration.

... supported by evidence

Culture and Health initiatives are rooted in the understanding that cultural engagement is a positive health behaviour¹¹ –similarly to engaging in health-enhancing physical activities (HEPA), eating nutritious food or being out in nature.

Cultural activities can be ‘active’ (e.g. singing, dancing, painting, sculpting) or ‘receptive’ (e.g. listening to music, visiting a museum, attending a theatre performance) and initiatives include diverse art forms, such as visual arts, music, dance, theatre, heritage, audiovisual and digital arts, and are applicable across the life course¹².

Culture and Health operates across healthcare and community settings, engaging diverse groups, including patients, families, healthcare workers, and the general public. Arts-based therapies are a part of the Culture and Health landscape. Nevertheless, this report is based on a wider appreciation of the multiple ways in which cultural engagement can lead to health and well-being outcomes, due to the intrinsic properties of culture.

This appreciation builds on research in neuroscience, psychology, and public health of the past four decades¹³.

Evidence from the academic and scientific literature, the World Health Organization (WHO)¹⁴, the EU preparatory action CultureForHealth¹⁵, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe policy work and projects¹⁶, highlight the effectiveness of culture and the arts in:

- Promoting mental, and physical health and well-being
- Preventing illnesses or the development of secondary conditions
- Supporting disease management and treatment
- Enhancing social inclusion, cohesion and well-being

Moreover, a recent Frontier Economics report quantified the economic benefits of cultural engagement, ranging from individual wellbeing to societal gains in the UK. The annual benefit is estimated at over £900 per person and £8 billion society-wide¹⁷.

¹¹ Sonke et al., ‘Defining “Arts Participation” for Public Health Research’; Sonke et al., ‘Relationships between Arts Participation, Social Cohesion, and Wellbeing’; Rodriguez et al., ‘Arts Engagement as a Health Behavior’.

¹² Fancourt and Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?*; Davies and Clift, ‘Arts and Health Glossary - A Summary of Definitions for Use in Research, Policy and Practice’; Warran, Burton, and Fancourt, ‘What Are the Active Ingredients of ‘Arts in Health’Activities?’; Sonke et al., ‘Defining “Arts Participation” for Public Health Research’.

¹³ Magsamen and Ross, *Your Brain on Art*; Chatterjee and Vartanian, ‘Neuroaesthetics’; Warran, Burton, and Fancourt, ‘What Are the Active Ingredients of ‘Arts in Health’Activities?’; Fancourt and Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?*; Golden et al., ‘Arts and Culture’; Rodriguez et al., ‘Arts Engagement as a Health Behavior’.

¹⁴ Fancourt and Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being?*; WHO, ‘Intersectoral Action between the Arts, Health and Well-Being’; WHO, ‘Arts and Health’; WHO, ‘WHO Expert Meeting on Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases’.

¹⁵ Zbranca, R. et al., ‘CultureForHealth Report: Culture’s Contribution to Health and Well-Being. A Report on Evidence and Policy Recommendations for Europe.’

¹⁶ European Commission, ‘Horizon Europe - European Commission’.

¹⁷ Frontier Economics, ‘Culture and Heritage Capital’.

This report bases itself on the biopsychosocial model of health¹⁸, which integrates biological, psychological, and social factors, and underscores the role of culture in fostering holistic wellbeing. Within this framework, cultural engagement can be seen as going beyond individual health outcomes, and also strengthening social cohesion, reducing stigma, and enhancing community resilience.

Despite recent progress, EU Member States vary in policy integration, with few having national strategies. One policy model that has gained traction in recent years is (culture-based) Social Prescribing, a mechanism to connect healthcare and social systems to community-based resources. However, here too, funding is often temporary and project-based, limiting scalability.

Key Findings

1. The transformative role of Culture and Health is evidence-based.

A robust body of research demonstrates that cultural engagement can improve health outcomes across the life course, including:

- **Mental health and well-being:** Reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety, loneliness and improves good mood.
- **Physical Health:** Supports the management of certain chronic, neurological, and cognitive conditions (e.g., Parkinson's, dementia, stroke, Multiple Sclerosis) and promotes healthy and active ageing.
- **Social Cohesion:** Strengthens community ties and reduces stigma for vulnerable groups.

Economic Impact: Evidence is emerging that culture-based interventions can yield good returns on investment, reducing healthcare costs with the potential to lowering medication use and hospitalisations.

Stakeholder-Driven Innovation: Culture and Health initiatives are predominantly pioneered by private actors, grassroots organisations, NGOs (e.g., artists, cultural professionals, medical associations), and cultural institutions. Their expertise and community trust are critical to designing effective interventions.

2. Culture and Health can help address current intersectoral challenges.

- **Health Sector:** Responding to the rising mental health crisis, healthcare workforce shortages, low investment in disease prevention and fragmented funding models.
- **Culture Sector:** Addressing precarious working conditions for creative practitioners and cultural professionals and underfunding.
- **Policy Gaps**
 - Insufficient practical support and leadership of intersectoral collaboration presents a risk that neither sector takes responsibility.
 - Fragmented governance structures: bureaucratic silos within health and culture sectors hinder scalable solutions.

3. Opportunities for Integration of Culture and Health.

Our report presents a matrix of 21 opportunities, categorised into health, cultural and global impacts, including:

- **Health:** Personalised care, reduced drug dependence, and improved health literacy.
- **Culture:** New artistic practices, job creation, and recognition of the role of creative practitioners for society beyond their association to intellectual and cultural outputs.
- **Social:** Combatting loneliness, fostering inclusion and social cohesion, and strengthening democracy.
- **Economic:** Cost savings through health promotion, prevention of illnesses and increased productivity.

¹⁸ Engel, 'The Clinical Application of the Biopsychosocial Model'.

Strategic Foundations for Implementation

Culture and Health is gaining increasing recognition at the EU level. Examples include support for strategic projects such as the EU preparatory action CultureForHealth and the Culture and Health Platform¹⁹ funded by Creative Europe, which aim to advance this field of practice. While most Member States already have a vibrant landscape of Culture and Health initiatives, these remain predominantly on a project-by-project level. As a result, the full potential of culture and the arts to contribute significantly to the health system remains unrealised. Furthermore, as an intersectoral field involving multiple stakeholders and differing widely across cultural and regional contexts, there is high variability in terms of project evaluations and design, best-practices, and frameworks for funding, accountability, quality-control, or capacity-building.

To realise the potential of Culture and Health, this report outlines a strategic approach focused on:

- Cross-Sectoral Collaboration: Strengthening partnerships between culture and health sectors at EU, national, regional and local levels.
- Policy Integration: Developing national and EU-wide strategies to mainstream culture into health policies and vice versa. To counter perceptions of cultural activities as peripheral to health, embed them in national health frameworks as preventive measures.
- Design and implementation of Culture and Health programmes.
- Capacity building.
- Advocacy.
- Strengthening the Evidence base.
- Research and Evaluation.

The Time to Act is Now

The integration of culture and health policies is a strategic imperative for Europe. It has the potential to contribute scalable solutions to pressing challenges such as, deteriorating mental health status, ageing populations, and social fragmentation – many of which are deeply interwoven and part of a complex “polycrisis”²⁰.

While systemic resistance to change and uneven priorities pose real challenges, the EU’s unique ability to convene stakeholders and align incentives can turn these barriers into opportunities for innovation. The time to act is now.

This report calls for a coordinated effort to develop joint Culture and Health strategies across the European Union, ensuring that all individuals can benefit from the transformative potential of cultural engagement.

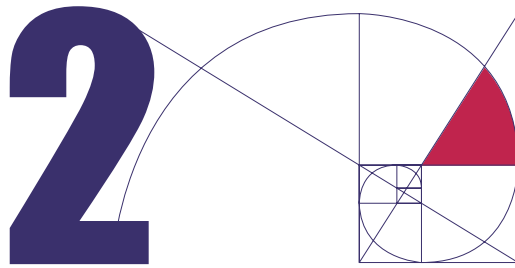
Embedding culture in health systems through policy frameworks and funding can empower communities through prioritising accessibility and inclusivity. Grassroots organisations and cultural institutions can reach marginalised groups and tailor programmes to local contexts.

The vision is clear: a Europe where cultural access and engagement is a cornerstone of individual and societal well-being.

By institutionalising partnerships — through EU strategies, stakeholder co-design, and evidence-based programmes — we can transform systemic resistance into innovation, ensuring Culture and Health is perceived not as optional, but as essential to resilient, equitable, and thriving societies.

¹⁹ Culture Action Europe, ‘CultureAndHealth Platform’.

²⁰ Mario G. H. Damen, ‘EU Policy Foresight’.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this report is to put a spotlight on how Culture and Health can bring the human element to the heart of key EU policy priorities to 2030 and beyond. The goals of competitiveness, democracy and security cannot be achieved without (mentally and physically) healthy individuals and communities and a vibrant, autonomous, inclusive and accessible cultural sector.

This OMC Expert Group aims to help create an environment in which the potential of Culture and Health can be realised in an equitable and sustainable way. The recommendations in this report emphasise the following key actions: fostering and removing barriers to collaboration, advancing evidence-based practices, promoting inclusivity, and systematically developing joint Culture and Health strategies. They are drawn from an analysis of existing good practices and policies (such as the ones presented in this report), and their potential to help address current EU challenges.

Key Recommendations to policy makers at the EU level

According to the latest Eurobarometer findings²¹, Europeans support a stronger EU role in culture and recognise culture as a major factor to their well-being (87%).

As the first EU-level expert group dedicated to this innovative topic, our fundamental recommendation is **for Member States and the EU institutions to work closely together to advance the role of culture and the arts for health and well-being through Europe-wide, cross-sectoral policies, programmes, and projects.**

To make this happen, we propose the development of an EU Culture and Health Strategy focusing on health promotion and disease prevention.

This strategic approach should be based on the recognition of cultural engagement as a health enhancing behaviour, contributing to mental and physical health and well-being (inspired by the works on health-enhancing physical activity or HEPA²²). This intersection promotes a greater emphasis on the factors that reinforce health and well-being (“salutogenesis”²³), rather than focusing on combatting the factors that create disease (“pathogenesis”). The suggested EU Culture and Health Strategy must also frame cultural engagement as cost-saving for public health, leveraging economic evidence to justify budget allocations.

²¹ European Commission DG -EAC, ‘Special Eurobarometer 562 : Europeans’ Attitudes towards Culture’.

²² Council of the European Union, ‘Council Recommendation of 26 November 2013 on Promoting Health-Enhancing Physical Activity across Sectors’.

²³ Keyes, ‘Mental Health as a Complete State’; Mittelmark et al., ‘The Handbook of Salutogenesis’; Benz et al., ‘Culture in Salutogenesis’.

The new EU Culture and Health Strategy should directly link to and be embedded in the overarching EU policy context for Culture and Health, notably:

- The upcoming **Culture Compass for Europe**, highlighting the strategic importance of the interconnection between culture and health;
- The future **EU Work Plan for Culture post-2026**, which should include concrete actions, such as continued work of Member States experts following-up to this OMC group as well as policy outputs in the Council (e.g. Council conclusions);
- The follow-up to the 2023 **Commission Communication “A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health** and possible other health-related policy initiatives.

The new EU Culture and Health Strategy should promote, as core elements:

1. **Better synergies between culture and health policy areas and strengthened collaborations among and within EU institutions**, notably within the Commission, between relevant Council Working Groups, and European Parliament Committees.
 - Encourage future **EU presidencies** to choose this topic as a priority and publish Council Conclusions and Council Recommendations.

- Set up a **Member States Expert Group**²⁴ to continue the work of this OMC group, which would inter alia establish a **monitoring framework**.

2. **Increased EU funding to Culture and Health policies and projects** in the future EU Multiannual Financial Frameworks and relevant EU programmes to support:
 - capacity-building for artists and healthcare professionals
 - collaborative, large scale, multi-country, interdisciplinary research projects
 - a Culture and Health Centre/ Observatory within an already existing institution.
3. **The implementation of culture-based social prescribing** at national or regional level.
4. **New avenues of cooperation** in the area of culture and arts engagement for emergency preparedness and resilience.
5. **Strengthened collaboration with other international organisations** with expertise in this field (such as the World Health Organisation and UNESCO, amongst others).
6. **Support for awareness raising and advocacy** through EU-wide campaigns and awards.
7. **Engagement of private and civil society actors** in co-designing policies and programs.

Key recommendations for the Member States

TO POLICY MAKERS

Depending on the administrative structures of the Member States, the following Culture and Health recommendations should be implemented on the national, regional and/or local level.

1. **Develop a national Culture and Health Strategy** focusing on health promotion and disease prevention, in line with the new EU Culture and Health Strategy.
2. **Establish a Culture and Health platform and competence network.**
3. **Implement Culture and Health programmes** that support health objectives from public health to acute care, including but not limited to, culture-based Social Prescribing²⁵.

²⁴ Based on the example of the HEPA Council Recommendation 2013/C 354/01

²⁵ <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789290619765>

4. **Foster the “pairing of institutions” across the cultural and health/care domain,** for example
 - Youth mental health: Schools with cultural centres / art schools / museums;
 - Older people: care homes with cultural centres / art schools.
5. **Launch national “Culture & Health” campaigns** for awareness raising and advocacy.
6. **Conduct and support (cross-disciplinary) research.**
7. **Secure sustainable cross-sectoral funding.**

TO CULTURE AND HEALTH PRACTITIONERS AND INSTITUTIONS

1. Proactively involve **vulnerable and marginalised groups**.
2. Prioritise the **support of youth mental health** and provide cultural activities as alternatives to screen time to foster behaviour change.
3. **Launch tailored programmes** at local cultural centres and Galleries, Libraries Archives, Museums (GLAM).
4. Develop **training programs**.
5. Implement **joint health and cultural actions**.
6. Ensure appropriate **monitoring and evaluation** and create databases/observatories to share evidence.
7. Leverage good practices to develop **models for replication / transferability**.

The Way Forward

The OMC Group has identified a range of interconnected options for implementing these recommendations. These options are set out in the ‘Actions to Take – Delivery and Implementation’ section, with concrete actions set out under the following areas:

1. Build and implement an EU Strategy for Culture and Health
2. Establish corresponding National Culture and Health Strategies in each Member State
3. Enable intersectional collaboration and pooling of resources
4. Design and implement Culture and Health Programmes
5. Build Capacity
6. Advocate for Culture and Health
7. Strengthen the Evidence Base

The intersection of culture and health represents a transformative opportunity for the European Union to address pressing societal challenges while fostering holistic well-being, social cohesion, and economic resilience to 2030 and beyond. This report underscores the compelling evidence that cultural engagement enhances mental and physical health, reduces healthcare costs, and strengthens communities.

The time to act is now! By integrating culture into health systems and policies, the Member States of the EU can unlock the full potential of this synergy to build a healthier, more inclusive, and resilient future. Now is the moment to turn vision into reality.

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